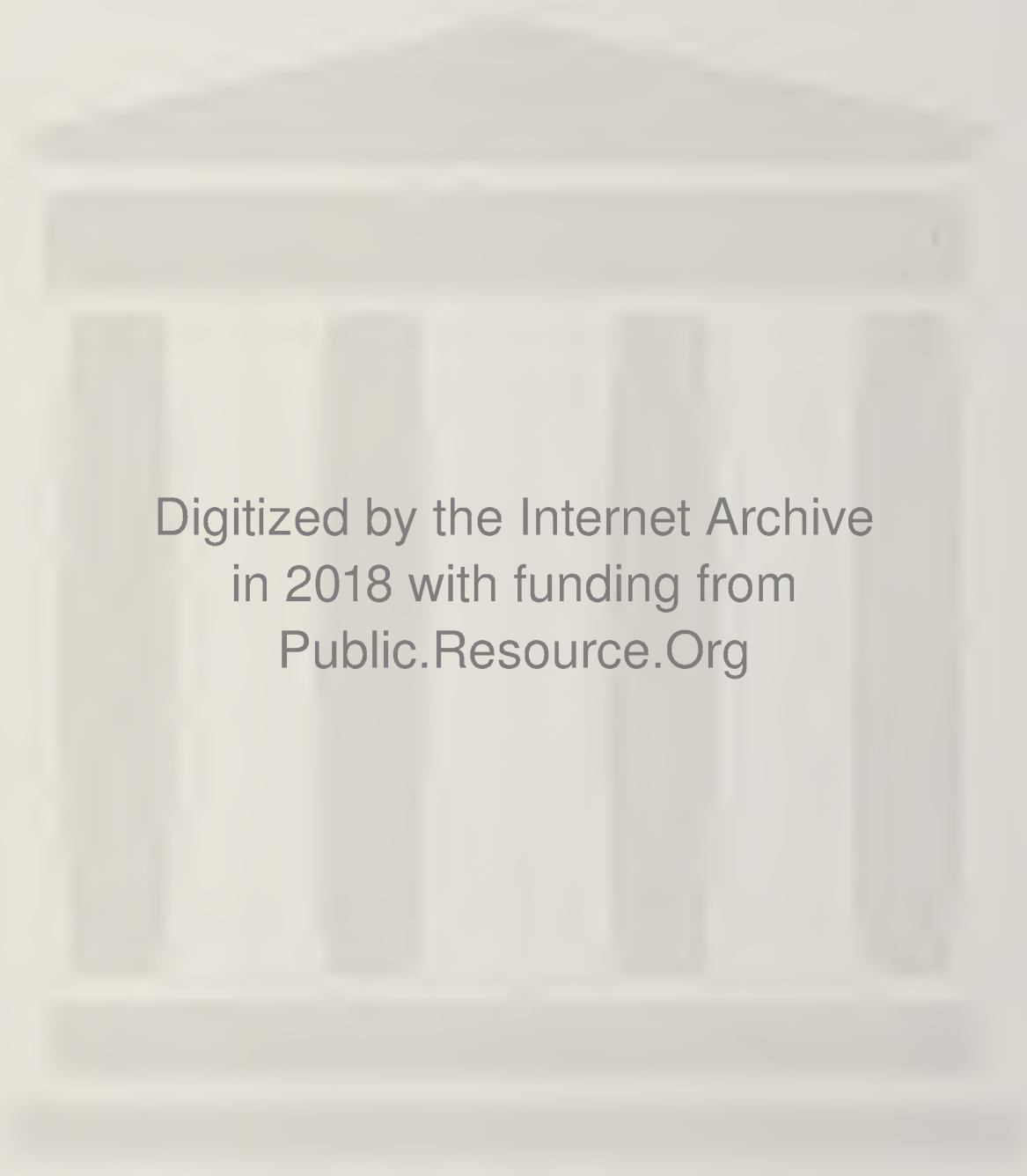


THE BHUJ STORY

After the Quake



RISHI MOHAN SANWAL



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The Bhuj Story

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Rishi Mohan Sanwal



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*Man will prevail
He is immortal
...because he has a soul, a spirit
capable of
compassion and sacrifice and endurance*

William Faulkner

Foreword

The Gujarat earthquake of 26 January 2001 was one of the worst earthquakes that the country has ever seen; that too in the wake of two consecutive years of drought in the state. It left 13,805 people including 1031 school children dead and around 167,000 persons injured.

By far the humanitarian response that it generated was also unparalleled. The help, that literally outpoured, came from all over the world, right from international agencies and governments to small private institutions and groups. As expected, the Gujarat State Government played a critical role in coordinating and leading the relief activities; repairing the infrastructure, channelling the help, setting up policies, and creating the requisite administrative structures. But most importantly, it was "people" who responded in various roles and capacities.

Rishi was one of the student volunteers who worked directly with the district administration. These volunteers from professional institutes like IIM Ahmedabad, Institute of Rural Management in Anand, and NID Ahmedabad got involved in many things, big and small. I was impressed by both their capabilities and dedication, and soon a relationship of mutual respect and trust developed between us. On quite a few occasions I found myself depending on Rishi or Prashant for inputs on various matters.

They and many other professionals who worked with the government provided a different flavour to our working. I think the professional touch in both policy making and execution helped the rehabilitation efforts immensely.

This book is a brilliant attempt at capturing a few lively slices from those days of frantic activity. Reading through these pages refreshes my memories of the days when I was posted as Special Relief Commissioner & Collector (Kutch). The author has made a

commendable attempt at portraying the life in those initial few months after the earthquake even while focusing on the lighter side of events.

I wish him and the book all the best.

Anil Mukim (I.A.S.)

Secretary to the Chief Minister, Gujarat
(Formerly Special Relief Commissioner &
Collector - Kutch)

Preface

Tring! Tring! The phone rang. *Tring! Tring!* The phone rang again.

Mansingh looked at his phone and paused his address to the IIM Ahmedabad professors. "Delhi", he muttered.

The personal secretary to a very senior national leader was on line, enquiring about the status of a particular village in Kutch district. After a short conversation, Mansingh shut the phone after re-assuring of prompt action.

There are more than a thousand villages in Kutch district. Hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals were contributing to the relief operations. The entire government machinery had been working overnight for the last four days. And Mansingh had the herculean task of providing a structure to one of the biggest operations that independent India has ever seen. It was nearly impossible for him to act promptly.

In the midst of all this collating a detailed report on a specific village would definitely have been difficult, if not impossible, for him. Luckily, Prashant, one of the students of IIM Ahmedabad was listening to his conversation.

Prashant has a habit of minding your business. He doesn't wait for you to formalize your problem. His solution is ready even before you know the problem. In this case, his solution emerged even before Mansingh knew him.

Prashant offered to collate a report for Mansingh.

There was no reason for Mansingh to refuse; a management graduate would definitely know how to write a report. However, the concern in this case was not that of arranging information; it appeared impossible to get the information itself.

But not for Prashant. Once Mansingh asked him to take up the job, Prashant got cracking. He knew this was his chance to prove his mettle.

Since the report had to be submitted by the evening, visiting

the village was out of question. It had to be finalised based on phone calls.

But there were no phones in that village.

Prashant opened a number of parallel communication channels. His ability to think of varied possibilities of establishing some contact was amazing. Right from checking from the relief distribution centre in Lalan College, Bhuj to locating an injured inhabitant of the village in a hospital in the Taluka headquarters, Prashant did everything.

By evening he submitted a two page summary report to Mansingh, which was promptly faxed to Delhi. Mansingh was pleased; for a change he had been given a report, instead of a thick stack of papers called file.

This established Prashant as a dedicated and capable individual. The DDO, Rajeev Topno and Mansingh himself began taking his help in closing such issues. He had proved that every extra bit of efforts is important. Even in a place crowded with volunteers, one more dedicated soul could make a difference.

And this began Prashant's team. Through Prashant a number of students from professional colleges of Gujarat joined the rehabilitation efforts, over a period of time.

I was one of them.

We worked with many organizations including the district collectorate, district development office, UNDP Abhiyan and other NGOs. In a very short period, we found ourselves involved in many activities ranging from writing letters to supervising activities.

This book is not a story of what we did. It is not a discourse on why you should do such things. It is a story of survival: a story of the bravery and determination of the common man in Kutch.

It is interesting to note that though I reached Bhuj just forty days after the earthquake, the people were very positive about life. Disaster was a reality; it had to be accepted, it was a thing of the past; the present had to be lived.

In working at varied levels in the rehabilitation efforts, I have realized that in any such operation, though the role of government and administrative agencies is important, it is the spirit of the common

people that determines the outcome. It is due to this resurgent spirit of the people of Kutch that, just three years after the quake, Kutch is on verge of completing the reconstruction.

Though, I do not claim to be a historian, I insist that the articles written here are all based on real events and people. I have tried to be as close to truth as possible, though information at places has been obtained from secondary sources.

Characters in *The Bhuj Story-After the Quake* are just like alphabets; they are the building blocks of society yet nobody ever notices them. This is not an attempt to glorify them, but an attempt to show that *life is beautiful* Hope you will enjoy it.

Rishi

25 March 2004

Delhi

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Who's who...

L. Mansingh: One of the first decisions that the Gujarat government made after the tragedy was to appoint Mansingh as the Chief Relief Coordinator for the Kutch District. Stationed at Bhuj, with Cabinet level powers, he was a key person in the relief and rehabilitation activities. Besides his efficiency at work and his timely decision-making, he had an amazing ability to make you feel comfortable with him.

Anil Mukim: A senior IAS officer, Anil Mukim was posted to Bhuj, four days after the earthquake as the Special Relief Commissioner. He was also entrusted the duties of the Collector of Kutch. Always referred to as the Collector Sahib, Mukim was loved and respected by all.

Mukim was later posted as the Secretary to the Chief Minister, Gujarat, and is serving the state in that capacity.

Rajiv Topno: The District Development Officer, a young IAS officer, was dark and thinly built. A very efficient and strict officer, Rajiv Topno remains one of the sharpest people I have ever met.

After playing a key role in the rehabilitation for over two years, Topno was promoted and posted as the Collector, Bharuch.

R S Ninama: As the Resident Deputy Collector, Ninama's responsibility was to ensure the implementation of all decisions taken by the district administration. A senior Gujarat Civil Services officer, Ninama was an extremely active individual, and simply loved being on his feet.

Ninama is currently posted as the Resident Deputy Collector of Palanpur district.

Prashant Girbane: One of my batch mates from IIM Ahmedabad, Prashant was responsible for my going to Bhuj. His fierce optimism and my "*be careful*" advice caused numerous clashes between the two of us, which, I think, both of us enjoyed.

He got so involved in the social sector that he declined a job offer from a leading corporate and went on to work with UNDP.

Olmado Garcia

I was introduced to Olmado Garcia by the Resident Deputy Collector, Ninama. Ninama had a habit of handing over all nonstandard bits and pieces of work to us. Thus, we were responsible for all kinds of minor troubleshooting. The current problem was a foreigner, who had come to contribute in the rehabilitation efforts but spoke only Spanish. Obviously, it was impossible to communicate with him.

I looked at the gentleman sitting across Ninama, and wished him a hello. "*Hola, Hola*", he replied giving a broad smile.

"Me, Rishi." I introduced myself.

"Olmado Garcia."

"*Sie sprach Deutsche?*" I tried the little German I knew.

"*Deutsche? Nein. Francais?*" he offered French instead.

But I hadn't taken the Business French course during my MBA. "Wrong choice", I told myself, and decided that if I ever do MBA again, I will learn Business French in place of Business German.

Olmado had a drill in his right hand and a solar panel look-alike in the left one. He made some weird gestures, waving his hands in air, plugging and unplugging his equipment and finally ended with *waatar, waatar* (*with a very soft 't*). After asking him to repeat his actions, and doing some actions of my own, I was able to interpret that he was interested in digging water wells. Also, he kept saying *Dollaar, no problemo!*

But what exactly was his expertise in digging wells was not at all clear. Was he offering us monetary help, was he a technical expert, or had he machinery to donate were important issues. The biggest issue, however, was that though Kutch is a dry area, the immediate problem on hand was not water. The earthquake had damaged buildings, and construction was our foremost priority.

Obviously, it was difficult to convey this through signals and gestures.

I tried doing so, but failed. There was no compromise on digging wells. After all, that is why he had come. I tried to impress him by showing photographs of damaged buildings, by showing new construction going on, but he persisted. "*Waatar, important.*"

We went around in groups where he would show me his equipment, simulate its working in air, I would nod in disagreement, and then show him broken buildings, and he would start all over again. *Waatar, important.*

There was no reason why I should have persisted with him. But I did. Because that man's spirit amazed me. Before coming to Bhuj, I had checked the health and hygiene conditions in Bhuj. I had enquired if Hindi is spoken and understood in Kutch. But Olmado had travelled thousands of miles, led only by his willingness to help. In my mind, I admired his spirit and we repeated the cycle from *Waatar, important* to *Waatar, important* once more.

We definitely needed a Spanish interpreter, but didn't know where to get one in Bhuj. My idea of doing a telephonic translation was what saved the day. Through Olmado, I got the phone numbers of *Indian Embassa* in Madrid. The Consul, gave me numbers of Spanish Consulate in Bombay, who directed me to a coaching institute and from where I got the phone number of Mrs. Mirchandani, a Spanish instructor.

With her help a basic level of contact was established and I was able to convince Olmado to get back to us with a translator.

Besides being committed, Olmado was also smart. When he came next time, he had hired Mrs. Mirchandani and flew her down from Bombay. *Dollaar, no problemo!*

Interaction became easy after that. We were able to convince Olmado to forget *water* and consider building a hospital as alternative. I advised him on villages to visit and NGOs to meet and we departed as two happy souls.

That was the last time I met Olmado. When I called up Mrs. Mirchandani later, they were looking for a van in Bombay, which could be fitted into a mobile hospital. After I left Bhuj, I lost Mrs. Mirchandani's phone number, and my contact with Olmado was gone forever.

But Olmado's memories will never leave me. Even today I can see him sitting across me with a drill in his right hand and a solar panel look-alike in the left one. *Waatar, importaant!*

Our Travels

Indians, and that includes me, have zest for travelling cramped. The packing ratio in the DTC buses in Delhi and Bombay local trains can put the Nazis to shame; we don't even need any gun-totting soldiers to push us in. This love, which starts due to an overstretched Public transport system, soon becomes a habit, and we always try to convince the auto driver to take that extra passenger.

It was not surprising, therefore, that when we left Ahmedabad for Bhuj for the first time, we booked a right sized vehicle ensuring that we just fit in. "Just" is the keyword there: I had to sit on the floor. None of us cribbed though. We are used to it, and anyway, we were all looking forward to the unknown that was waiting for us in Bhuj.

But that was nothing when compared to the next Ahmedabad-Bhuj trip that we had. We had a Tata Sumo this time, which is a very spacious vehicle. And, just three of us (Prashant, Bahadur and I) were supposed to travel in a car that has a certified capacity of ten passengers.

But perhaps, Prashant didn't like that; so he roped in a few guys from NID for a trip to Bhuj. To further complicate the matters he decided to transport a few huge cardboard sheets¹ to Bhuj that had to be tied on the roof of the vehicle. All our bags and suitcases, hence, had to be accommodated inside only. It took us some effort to pack ourselves in: Prashant and another guy in the front seat with the driver, four NID guys in the middle seat, and Bahadur and I with lots of luggage in the back.

Now, Prashant is a smart person. Whatever he does, he does it with excellence. When he decides to be unwise, he has to excel in that too. Just when, we were marveling at our packing ability, he disclosed the plan to travel to Anand and pick up another volunteer. Anand is exactly the opposite direction from Bhuj, and hence, by his masterstroke Prashant had added not only a

¹ These cardboard sheets were used to make notice boards in the Information Gallery that we were setting up.

passenger, but also another three hours to our journey.

The interesting thing is that though we were on a common mission, we were all strangers. There were Prashant, Bahadur and myself from IIMA, and we knew each other. There were six guys from NID who could be divided into two groups, of four and two, who barely knew each other. Prashant had met one person in each group in the morning, and he had once talked to Nidhi on phone.

The driver knew nobody.

It could almost have been a public transport vehicle.

Those eleven hours sitting in a cramped pose is something I am unlikely to forget in a hurry.

Mostly we worked on different things and rarely did all of us travel together. Anyway, the NID students left after designing the Information Gallery in three days flat. Ghonto² and others also left after two weeks of work. The Tata Sumo then became the official car for Prashant, Nidhi and me.

It was private car requisitioned by the government for what was known as earthquake duty. On the passenger side of the windshield, was a sheet of paper boldly proclaiming "On Govt. Duty." That sheet of paper, with a small signature by Ninama was a universal license. Our vehicle was never stopped at the collectorate gate and we could park it anywhere. Though it was never explicitly used, the sticker always provided a sense of importance and self-confidence. It was a certificate from the government that we were working for the people of Bhuj.

For some reasons the same sticker also said MV-05. The 05, I believe, referred to the fact that this was the fifth car of its type. Logically then "MV" should have referred to the type. But there was no other "type". The stickers were used only on the private cars requisitioned by the administration for quake relief work. I never saw any other type of sticker.

Perhaps, Ninama had thought that just a 05 would become lonely and frustrated, and so provided it company by adding MV.

² Refer to the article Ghonto

One of my friends used to insist that MV stood for Motorized Vehicle, a remnant from the British days, when probably they needed to differentiate the motorized vehicles from the rest.

But in my opinion, most of the motorized vehicles are visibly different from the non-motorized ones. Why the British required a sticker for identifying them is still not clear to me. Of course I did not spend too much time over the issue. So long as it helped us in our work, I had no complaints with that sticker and whatever was written on it.

The use of this vehicle, however, had one disadvantage: the driver. He was an added constraint in life. We were volunteers and didn't mind working late into the night, but retaining the driver beyond 9 PM was not feasible. Even within the day the schedule had to take into account his lunch, his frequent tea breaks and, on top of it all, his afternoon naps. Also, apparently the driver community in Gujarat is out to prove Murphy's Law.

On a hot dry afternoon, you have a talk with the District Development Officer on the phone and promise to meet him in a few minutes. You come out only to find that the car is there, but the driver is not. You go around looking all over the campus for him, waste fifteen minutes and finally find him napping in a new location every time. I have had innumerable such experiences.

In one case, I found the driver missing along with the car. I checked with Prashant and Nidhi. Both of them did not have an idea of where he was. As always I was in a hurry. I was scheduled to meet Mansingh, the Chief Relief Coordinator, and I hadn't shaved for three days. I had to visit a barber. I had no option but to wait for the driver. By the time he finally appeared I had been waiting for half an hour. No chance of going to the barber now. The height of irony was the excuse driver gave for disappearing. "*Maine socha ki aap is time to kahin jaate nahin hain, to main dadhi banane chala gaya tha.* (I thought since you generally don't use the car in the afternoons, I went off to get a shave!)"

That day I realized that to be self-sufficient, capability to steer a vehicle was necessary. It was not easy to learn to drive the vehicle I had, so I decided to have the vehicle that I had learnt to drive.

Valvi, the *mamlatdar* of Bhuj, lent me his bike and that provided me unparalleled freedom. Life was never the same again.

One good thing with a bike is that you can never be cramped, as triple riding is not allowed. Moreover, I could wake up at will, without worrying about the driver's arrival time. I could stay in office at will, without worrying about the driver's departure time. I could keep my promises of meeting people, without worrying about the driver's napping time. On top of it all, I could get a shave at will, without worrying about the driver's shaving time! I felt like a young bird that has just learnt flying.

But there were problems in this system too: being the only person in our group who had this freedom, I also became a backup driver for Prashant and Nidhi.

Very soon my daily routine included picking up Nidhi from her residence at 9 a.m. and dropping her back at the end of the day's work, which was generally around midnight. Before picking her up, Prashant had to be taken for breakfast to the nearest *Jalebi fafda* stall.

That was when I really understood what they meant when they taught us about rights and duties always going together.

Since we worked with a number of agencies (at a number of levels) had to keep travelling between places. On an average I must have made more than a dozen trips every day. I sometimes think that we were acting as the senses of the district administration, always moving from office to office and *taluka* to *taluka*, carrying news and instructions between places.

All these trips and tours were done in different vehicles, with different people, with different drivers. Only, the spirit was the same. So long as you were moving, you knew that you were advancing. Life is after all a journey...

Mahendra Singh

"*Rishiji, Aap meri baat suniye*³." Mahendra Singh always began a conversation with that. I didn't mind that. Within a conversation, he frequently interrupted me with that. That sometimes irritated me. But what took the cake was that he interrupted himself with that. He would insert a "Rishiji, listen to me", in the middle of a sentence!

Other than that, he was repetitive. He used to repeat everything he said. I mean, he was really really repetitive. Sometimes, I felt like telling him that I was spending at least two hours a day listening to him. But I never did. Because Mahendra Singh delivered. Rather, his trucks did. They delivered GI sheets, and, they did it in time.

GI or Galvanized Iron Sheets are the wavy metal sheets that you generally see on rooftops in hill stations. The government decided to provide GI sheets to people for use as medium term temporary roofs. Mahendra Singh was the contractor hired for transporting the sheets to the quake-affected villages. Rakes full of GI sheets arrived at the Bhuj Railway Station where they were loaded on to Mahendra Singh's trucks that took them to the villages.

Those were the days when rebuilding activities had just started. The district administration was handling unprecedented amount of work. Even with an increased staff, extra help was always welcome. That is why Topno, the District Development Officer, took no time in assigning us to work as soon as we landed in Bhuj as volunteers. I was asked to look after the demand and supply of GI sheets. No responsibilities were fixed; no powers defined.

On visiting the Railway station I met Rathod, the Deputy Collector in charge of Railway Station. There was disorder all around, and Rathod was confused. Though they were sending sheets to Anjaar as per orders, the trucks were not being unloaded there. Reportedly there was a manpower shortage at Anjaar. I was talking

³"Mr. Rishi, please listen to me."

to Rathod, when someone informed Mahendra Singh of my existence and he rushed to the control office.

Without even bothering to know about my identity he started blasting me. "*Hamara kaam truck chalane ka hai Sahab, murdon ko jilaane ka nahin hai*⁴." "So, he is dissatisfied with the government officials," I thought, "Nothing new, who isn't."

He didn't have much to say, but his amazing ability to keep repeating himself ensured that I had a long discussion with him. Despite getting bored, I kept talking. I had to work with him; it was necessary that he be kept in good humor.

His family had been living in Kutch since ages, and it had been in the transportation business since an equal amount of time. He was proud of both facts. "*Mere dadaji oont gadi chalate the sahab. Bhuj aur Mandvi ke beech main. Hum Mandvi ke rahne vaale hain. Yeh transportation to hamare khoon main hai sahab*⁵." I never contested his skills in arranging good transportation, but still he felt the need to keep convincing me. I had to keep in mind that Mahendra Singh was the best transporter in town. Not only that, I also needed to remember that the transporters doing fertilizer business are the best transporters.

In a few days, we became a good team. I was impressed by his work. His trucks always arrived on time in the morning. They were loaded and dispatched swiftly. They came back in time. His records were perfect. Though we were dispatching about thirty thousand sheets per day, rarely was a wrong delivery done.

On the other hand, he liked me because I listened to him! It appeared no one had ever given him that kind of importance. After all, he was a contractor, and administrators are not really fond of listening to their contractors. I, on the other hand, gave him full time to speak; showing a sincere interest in all that was being repeated. In no time, I realised that was the trick. With Mahendra Singh you could get away with anything, just by hearing him out.

⁴ "I am here to drive trucks, and not to blow life into these corpses."

⁵ "My grandfather used to drive a camel cart; between Bhuj and Mandvi. We basically belong to Mandvi. Transportation business is our paternal business."

Anything? Did I say *anything*? Then, I must be wrong. Because his affection and love for his employees was unparalleled. His assistants, his drivers and the labourers were all like sons to him. One thing that he could never accept was mistreatment of his employees. Perhaps, that is why he commanded such respect from them. Perhaps, that is why he was so efficient in his work.

It was not surprising then, that Mahendra Singh stopped loading the trucks, when a policeman supervising the loading operations slapped one of his labourers. He wanted to file a police complaint against the policeman in question. The collector was not in town and I had absolutely no idea of what to do.

I made frantic efforts to locate the collector on phone, but was unsuccessful. I tried convincing Mahendra Singh to resume loading and promised to solve the issue as soon as the collector came back. But he refused to oblige. "My labourers are not criminals. Even if he made a mistake, you have no right to beat him. *FIR lodge hone tak. kaam bandh.*⁶"

Try, as much as I could, there was no way to convince him. His man had been ill-treated and he refused to begin loading until justice was done. There was nothing to discuss on that. Loading commenced only after the collector came back, and a police complaint was registered against the erring policeman.

But to be fair to Mahendra Singh, that was the only incident when loading stopped. Otherwise, he, his workers, his trucks, and their drivers worked seven days a week; for two months, till the work was over. Together, we ensured that GI Sheets reached all villages.

After that I left Bhuj, and joined my job in Bombay. That was almost three years back. But Mahendra Singh still calls me up. Mostly he talks and I listen. After all, that is what our relationship was.

⁶"No loading till a police complaint is registered"

Bahadur

Bahadur⁷ married.

Bahadur married Swati.

Bahadur married Swati, the daughter of Dinesh bhai.

But he did a lot of things before that.

There was indeed a lot he did for the people of Neelpar⁸.

After the earthquake struck, different people chose different ways of contributing to the relief and rehabilitation activities. Some contributed by giving materials, some donated money, some gave their time and some invested their brains. Bahadur gave all this. And more; he gave his heart to Kutch.

Bahadur reached Kutch as part of a contingent of Professors and students from IIM Ahmedabad. That was just three days after the earthquake. They were travelling in two cars, with food, medicines and other supplies, for distribution as well as for their own use.

On their way to Bhuj, the IIM Ahmedabad contingent took a detour to the Neelpar village near Rapar. At Neelpar they rested at an *ashram* called Gram Swaraj Sangh. The *ashram* headquarters an organization of the same name.

Despite the hectic activities of the *ashram*, there was an air of strange tranquility. Though the *ashram* had not much to offer other than a warm welcome and water, the visitors were impressed by the place. The *ashram* was to them what an oasis is to the thirsty traveller of the desert.

When the contingent moved on to Bhuj, and Prashant was part of it, Bahadur decided to stay at Neelpar. He had found his *karmabhumi*. He knew this was the place he had come for, he knew this was the place that needed him; he knew this was his place

⁷ Actually named Sanjay Singh, but for unknown reasons always referred to as Bahadur in his social circles

⁸Neelpar is situated near the township of Rapar, district Kutch

For past many years. Ramesh bhai and Dinesh bhai have been working for the betterment of the women and weaker sections of the society. The earthquake had added a new responsibility to their lives: rehabilitation and reconstruction.

A whole new set of activities was required to be done. Gram Swaraj Sangh started getting more visitors than ever. More funds were required. In short, the operations had to be suddenly ramped up to new levels.

In such a situation, Bahadur, an IIM Ahmedabad Graduate, brought immense value to the organization. His speciality was handling the outside world. To an organization that had mostly dealt with Ahmedabad and Mumbai, but now had to deal with Amsterdam and Munich, such skills were a welcome asset.

From Government Officials to foreigners, Bahadur could interact with anyone with comfort. Not only did he prepare reports on various activities, but he also started managing the existing and the prospective donor organizations. Also, sorting government related matters in Bhuj and Gandhinagar now became his responsibility.

Additionally, he became the CTO of the organization: managing the single computer that had recently appeared from somewhere.

It was not that the organization lacked these skills before Bahadur came. Since its inception, Ramesh Bhai and Dinesh Bhai have been managing the affairs of the *ashram* with success. Nevertheless, extra help at this juncture was undoubtedly welcome. And Bahadur offered that at no extra cost. He was happy even without a cover over his head. It is still remembered in the *ashram* that in those days, Bahadur sometimes slept on the *jhoola* (swing) in the garden!

The best thing that happened, however, was that Bahadur simply merged into the organization. He was never seen as a guest. And, as much as he impressed people with his abilities, he also won over hearts with his humility. It was as if a long lost member of the organization had come back.

However, it was not as smooth as this narrative might make it appear. Bahadur was a sincere volunteer, good at English, deft at preparing reports, and an expert at the computer, but there was still

something lacking. He did not know Gujarati, the local language.

It was easy to talk with all the agencies on behalf of Gram Swaraj Sangh; it was daunting to talk to Gram Swaraj Sangh! Most of the people Bahadur talked to, could speak some Hindi, group discussions inevitably happened in Gujarati.

It is to Bahadur's credit that he still went on attending *chaupals*, coordination meetings, etc. For hours, together he would sit quiet; just listening to discussions in a language he could not understand. He could not follow the words, but it was important to understand the feelings. At the end, when somebody would brief him on the discussions, he could instantly put together the two and create a complete picture.

Soon he picked up some Gujarati. Not much; but enough to help him in managing the day-to-day affairs. His efficiency at work increased even more and attending the meetings started becoming useful.

Though his command over Gujarati was still far from perfect, within a few days he started taking an active role in rehabilitation work.

Life in the villages was obviously different from working on a computer in the *ashram*. The work was tough; the progress was slow and painful; there could have been times when Bahadur could have faltered. He didn't. Or at least his dedication didn't. Because, at least on one occasion, Bahadur himself did.

It was on a construction site, where he was inspecting some work that Bahadur put the wrong foot forward and came tumbling down to the ground. He didn't get injured much, except a slight sprain on one foot.

He had to be put on bed rest for a couple of days, when Dinesh bhai's wife took good care of him. She was like a mother to all the residents; she was more to him. Even some of the *ashram* rules were bent to ensure his comfort in the days when he was unwell.

Impressing somebody by being efficient and effective is easy; to win over a mother's love you really have to be good. Bahadur was. And though he did not know it then, he had already made his biggest conquest. He had been truly accepted into the household.

It took them some time but the day came when Dinesh Bhai and his wife realized that Bahadur was more than just another volunteer. And once the idea dawned on them, things moved really fast.

The next time Bahadur visited Neelpar, Dinesh bhai broached the idea of Bahadur's marriage to his daughter Swati. Swati was herself active in the social sector and was working with an organization in Mumbai.

Bahadur is a simple soul, and is not really comfortable with such complex decisions. He rejected the proposal.

The reason: *Thakuron main aisa nahin hota.*

Dinesh bhai could have accepted that but when has fate ever bowed to the wishes of mortals. Dinesh bhai had decided to forget the issue, but as luck would have it, while traveling through Ahmedabad, Bahadur accidentally met Swati.

She had a simple question for him, *Bina dekhe, bina mile, aise kaise mana kar diya?* (How could you reject the proposal without even seeing or meeting me?)

That was more than what Bahadur could handle. He fell in love with Swati. Even when his dad rejected the proposal on the grounds that *thakuron main aisa nahin hota*, it did not deter Bahadur. The bond with Gram Swaraj Sangh was too strong to be ignored.

Bahadur and Swati were married in April 2002, two years after the earthquake. Bahadur has been truly accepted into the household. He knew this was the place he had come for, he knew this was the place that needed him; he knew this was his place.

Joshiji

When we had reached Bhuj for the first time, it was 2 a.m in the morning. Before leaving Ahmedabad, Prashant had talked to the Residential Deputy Collector, Ninama. Ninama had assured us that arrangements for staying would be made. But we got delayed on the way and at that weird hour, there was no one to help us. The Emergency Control desk was still functional, but they refused to act. Arrival of five volunteers was not defined as an emergency!

Waking up Ninama wasn't a very good idea so we spent the night in a hotel. But when we met Ninama the next day, we managed to create a guilty feeling in him. A set of students had come to help the administration, he had assured proper arrangements, but they had been forced to spend the night on the top floor of a 4-storeyed building. In view of the after shocks that were still frequent, it was a bold (in our case: desperate) thing to do.

Ninama promptly called up the Liaison Officer, Joshi and instructed him to look into our accommodation. By the evening we had two small tents put up in the Polytechnic grounds. The college had been closed after the quake, and was not expected to open soon.

Cots and beds and blankets and even a table were arranged. We were impressed with the Liaison Officer. Joshi, or Joshi *ji* as he was lovingly referred to, also put an attendant and four home guards on round the clock duty. Buildings were scarce; manpower was not.

If you would carefully reread the above paragraph you would realize that though the arrangements were quite good for a night's rest, I have avoided any mention of the morning's needs. We were assured that in the morning they would find the keys to one of the toilets in the Polytechnic building, and get it cleaned. Whenever government officials give you an assurance, you tend to accept their words. Either they are very convincing, or you realize that you have no other option. Either ways, you have to accept their word. I fell in for the first reason; Joshiji appeared to be a sincere fellow.

However, other than the disappearance of the attendant, nothing new happened in the morning. Let aside being cleaned, the toilet was not opened at all. It was not surprising then that Prashant was visibly upset and the matter was promptly reported to Ninama.

That evening when we came back, the entire engineering college campus was swarming with men. Working, walking, shouting and doing God knows what. Keenly observing, and I am known to have an observant eye, I realised that there were not more than 5-6 men. But there was so much confusion that like molecules of gas, they seemed to occupy the whole space.

With difficulty I was able to locate Joshiji, in that crowd. He just gave me a smile and went on with his working, walking, shouting and doing God knows what. We were utterly confused so as to what was happening.

Prashant wasn't able to take it for long, and caught hold of Joshiji. "*Toilets ka kya hua?*" On the face of it, this appears to be an innocent query, but Joshiji simply lost his patience, and burst out, "*Dekhte nahin, main upset hoon !*"

Though that did not tell us about the cause of commotion, it did tell us that the cause would have to be ascertained from somewhere else, Joshiji would not tell. So we waited till things stabilized. Peace regained, people started leaving. I thought of asking Joshiji once more about the commotion but he was clearly in bad mood.

Later the attendant told us, that after getting scolded by the RDC, Joshiji was determined to ensure that we don't get a second chance to crib. He was determined to make the *perfect* arrangements. Toilets had been cleaned, but water supply was still a problem.

There was an underground water tank, and we would have been perfectly happy pulling water from it. But Joshiji did not know that, so he decided to use an electric motor and get the overhead tank filled. For that the electric supply to the complex, which was cutoff from the day of the quake, was switched on.

Till some time everything was fine. Joshiji must have been smiling from ear to ear, before he saw flames and smoke coming out of a hostel room in the campus. In no time his perfect

arrangements had turned into an emergency. He had a fire to deal with! That too, on the 3rd floor of a damaged building, climbing which was undoubtedly risky.

That was when we had reached there. Not surprising then, Joshiji was upset, and he had no qualms in accepting that.

However, even in that confusion, Joshiji managed it pretty well. Electric supply was cut immediately. Joshiji led his men with buckets of water to the room, doused the fire and switched off the heater that had caused the fire. But he had decided to put the blame of the flame on us.

It was quite some time before we interacted with him again. Rather, I interacted with him. Because he never excused Prashant.

We understood that pretty well. He was an official in a position of responsibility and Prashant had rubbed him on the wrong side.

One of my favorite methods of conning people in those times was to use the student card. That is a permit that works all over India from local buses in Delhi to local trains in Bombay. Bhuj was no different. You just had to bring in "*hum to student hain* (I am a student)", and you had won the argument. All requests were accepted, all favours granted. Instantly.

The student card, however, never seemed to work with Joshiji. He would simply ignore the argument. I would have never been able to guess the reason had he himself not told me.

We were talking of making some arrangement so that we could prepare morning tea for ourselves. As usual I threw *hum to student hain*. Joshiji looked at me, thought for a while and gave a faint smile. "So what? I am a school teacher."

He was not an administrator! In fact even he had volunteered his services, and had been appointed as the Liaison Officer temporarily. My respect for him instantly shot up, and Prashant followed. After all we were students, and he was a teacher.

In a few days, we were no more outsiders. We were working full time with the administration. There was no need for a Liaison Officer to talk to us. Our official interaction with Joshiji stopped, but the unofficial continued. Who would end a relationship with a dedicated and efficient gentleman?

I have many fond memories of the place. And amongst the images that refuse to blur is of Joshiji saying *Main upset hoon*.



The earth was split

.....the houses damaged





...all offices destroyed...



....no place to call our own....



....yet we smiled...for hope is always there



First temporary shelters were made....

and temporary infrastructure....



....one converted to many....





.....with hard work
and determination,
we scaled
new heights

.....foundation for future were laid



Bhonga

There was a *bhonga* in the collector office campus. In fact it was the oldest building in that campus. It was said that years back, during the British times, it used to be the collector's office. Of course, nobody believed that and so did I. Even in a desert the British Collector would have built something grander for himself.

But then, you don't know what a *bhonga* is, so let me explain. A *bhonga* is a traditional dwelling structure of Kutch area. It is a small room with cylindrical stone walls and a conical roof made of bamboo. The height of the center point can be thus as high as 6-7 meters from the ground. There is an opening in the wall that acts as a door, and many other small openings that make the structure very airy.

The structure is aptly suited to the climatic conditions in the region. The tall cone keeps the room cool. The windows and door keep it airy. The conical structure of the roof ensures that the rainwater does not stagnate. It is, also, arguably the safest structure in the face of an earthquake. The circular walls are definitely more stable and the conical roof, even if it were to fall, is better than a straight roof.

So, like all other *bhongas* of the world, this one was stable too. After the earthquake, when all other buildings were damaged, the *bhonga* stood with pride. With no cracks whatsoever.

I was told that when the UNDP had moved in for relief and rehabilitation they had set up their offices in the *bhonga*. I still cannot imagine an international body like UNDP running its operations from a *bhonga*! But those were the days just after the quake, and there were no safe structures around. Tents were the only option, and, a *bhonga* was more spacious than a tent at least. Later on, however, UNDP moved in its containerized offices, and the *bhonga* was deserted.

Our attention was drawn to the *bhonga* when Prashant floated the idea of an Information Gallery, Information Gallery was to be single window information point on all earthquake related activity.

Information from government, UN bodies, and NGOs would be collated and distributed free of cost. It would have information on all damages occurred, all rehabilitation activities being done, all activities being planned and all contact numbers: all under one roof. One room where you could get answers to all your questions.

Initially, Prashant had a tent in his mind, but Ninama suggested that the *bhonga* would be better. We got the *bhonga* cleaned up, a few students from National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad volunteered to redesign the layout, and the *bhonga* was handed over to Nidhi. Nidhi had joined us recently and had agreed to set up the information gallery.

Besides a central table and a few chairs, a telephone was installed. I am sure a lot of *bhongas* would have, in their glorious days, seen these things. But our *bhonga* beat them all, when a computer was installed in the *bhonga*. Though there is no way of checking it, I am positively sure that never would have any other *bhonga* seen a computer. Unknown to everybody, our *bhonga* had become the best of all *bhongas* - the most advanced, a true 21st century *bhonga*. And, why not? After all it was the only *bhonga* in the Collectorate, which arguably is the most important place in the district.

Glorious moments came when the gallery became functional. Besides top officials like Mansingh and Mukim who visited it regularly, there were visitors from various UN bodies. There were reporters and NGO people. A high point came however, when Vijay Amritraj visited Bhuj. A very straight and to the point person, Amritraj met the Collector very briefly and wanted to move on very quickly. Mukim, however, insisted that he visit the Information Gallery. Somebody had a camera, and a photograph of Vijay Amritraj in the *bhonga*, surrounded by Mukim, Ninama, Prashant and Nidhi adored the computer desktop for long after that.

Dawn inevitably follows the night, but so does dusk follow the day. The *bhonga* had by now seen enough good days. Even a *bhonga* is not allowed more than a fair share of happiness. So what if it is the only *bhonga* in the collectorate campus.

There came a morning when dark clouds covered the skies.

Thunder thundered and lightning lightened the sky. Pre-monsoon rains were about to break.

We became concerned about the *bhonga*, and the things inside. Though the computer and the phone could be covered instantly, the cardboard could not be. And, cardboard once spoiled can never be put right. The roof had to be water proofed.

Now, *bhonga* being a traditional structure, we depended on the traditional solutions. A traditional *bhonga* architect was called and given the traditional contract of waterproofing the roof. Traditionally, the roof is always covered by dried bamboo leaves (yes! Such things do exist), and so the bamboo roofing on our *bhonga* was covered by dried bamboo leaves, by presumably a skilled *bhonga* architect. This could have been the end of this story except that the work done by the *bhonga* architect didn't seem foolproof. I could see sunlight coming in from the roof.

All my life I have known that water can pass through holes. If I could see holes in that roof, I was sure rainwater would see them as well. And then, it will be tempted to pass through them. Once it does that, falling inside the *bhonga* would be the only option left. But somehow, that argument was not convincing enough for the government official, Mr. X who was overlooking the entire process. The *bhonga* architect had claimed *paani ander nahin aa sakta sahab, meri guarantee hai*.

Mr. X had immense belief in the *bhonga* architect and his guarantee. Arguing with him would have been fruitless. After all this was the same guy who had felt that the model houses being built by a particular NGO were the best because Nafisa Ali was running the NGO. And, Nafisa Ali had been Miss India during his youth!

Escalating the issue did not somehow seem proper, so we waited for the rainfall. Light drizzle started in the evening. By then the *bhonga* architect had taken his money and disappeared, and so had his guarantee. In no time the roof started dripping.

The only option to save the material inside was to transfer it to another room. There were the newly constructed offices next to the *bhonga*, and Ninama allocated one of them to the information gallery. We shifted the material rapidly, salvaging whatever boards

UNDP Bhuj was set up by United Nations Development Program as the local unit for coordinating the relief effort on the ground zero and the various donor agencies. Their office, which consisted of two well-equipped containerized cabins connected at the top by a heavy sheet, had a white board in front of this setup. The heading boldly proclaimed: *Schedule of Meetings*. Below that was a list of coordination meetings, along with dates and times for each. The organization was clearly focused on coordinating.

To hammer in the point, UNDP brought Praveen Pardesi, the ex-collector of Latur, as the head of UNDP Bhuj. Besides his other strengths Pardesi had a unique trait: he could not work on less than two things at a time. He would nonchalantly choose two or more from his cell-phone, landline phone, email, guests, subordinates, and proceed to work with them simultaneously. Perhaps the organization believed that a single guy managing multiple activities would automatically improve the coordination between them.

Then there was *Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan*, better known as *Abhiyan*. It was formed much before the earthquake when Sushma *ben* and Sandeep *bhai*, brought over twenty different Non-Government Organizations working in Kutch under one roof. It was an important effort at coordinating and channelising NGO activities then, it became all the more important after the quake. *Abhiyan* came to represent the NGO face in Kutch and became the center of the non-government activity.

I had a chance to meet Sushma and Sandeep only once. For the forty odd minutes that I was there, we discussed three different issues. They disagreed with each other on all of them.

Nidhi later told me that Sushma and Sandeep were known for disagreeing with each other.

It is slightly surprising that despite all the work being done by these organizations, we could still find a role in coordination. Of course it was an informal one and in those days no one would have even realized that we were playing such a role. But we did work out a lot of things that can be classified as coordination.

Amongst other things that helped in all this was the fact that

Prashant had won over the confidence of both Sushma and Pardesi.

Though real willingness and ability to contribute had to be demonstrated to impress Sushma, winning over Pardesi was much easier. During the terrible Latur earthquake of 1991, Prashant lived in Latur, and Pardesi was the Collector of Latur. So when they met for the first time, and that was in Bhuj, there was an instant bonding. They had a common past. That they had a common present as well also helped.

We worked with the DDO, were close to Mukim, discussed and debated things at *Abhiyan* and ate with Pardesi. The close connections we had, helped us in being close to the center of activity; and since coordination was the buzzword, we had to get our share of the coordination cake. Prashant was not entirely wrong in foreseeing that we would play an important role in coordination.

After I left the place, the government almost officially credited our role in coordination efforts. When Nidhi took up an assignment with GSDMA⁹, she was handed over the responsibility of coordinating between the government and NGOs; a task that she is still doing. However, to be fair to her, besides coordinating activities, she also works.

⁹Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority

Ghonto

"*Rishi Saab! Aap kahan hain ?Hum besabri se aapka intjaar kar rahe hain.* (Where are you? We are eagerly waiting for you.)" That was the *Mamlatdar* of Bhachau, over the phone. After assuring him that I was on my way, I immediately called up Ghonto. Bhachau had not only requested our help; they were eagerly waiting for me! Undoubtedly, Ghonto deserved a share in this happiness.

Before my visit, Ghonto aka Amitabh Tapadar had been the only one of us to visit Bhachau, and his experiences there were quite unforgettable. But then, I think I should start the story from the beginning.

To ensure proper rehabilitation and relief measures, the government conducted a comprehensive survey on the damage to each and every house in Bhuj. But the data in the survey forms was difficult to use and compile, and hence, the government decided to get the data keyed in. The data entry process thus became one of the main activities of the administration.

In the discussions with the DDO, it emerged that the data entry work needed to be monitored and supported. In the tent outside Topno's home, which we used to call *darbar*, it was decided to hire more computer terminals and data entry operators, and set up new data entry centers in some *taluka* headquarters. Ghonto was put in charge of the project.

The next day he led a bus with 10 college students and 10 computers, on his way to set up two data entry centers, one each in Bhachau and Rapar. There were many such buses that I saw off later on, but Ghonto was the pioneer. Not surprisingly, his experiences were quite different from those who followed. What was surprising was that the difference was not because of this being the first trip. It was because he was going to Bhachau.

Of course we didn't know all this until Ghonto came back the next day: tired, frustrated, surprised and confused. His story was short, but not sweet. Rapar went off exactly as envisaged. There

were some problems in setting up a room with electrical connections, but the TDO got it done. However, the experience in Bhachau had been simply unbelievable. They had refused to let Ghonto set up a data entry center.

Those were the days of hectic activity and resulting confusion. Command structures were sometimes not so clear. But Ghonto was a representative from the district headquarters. And with a letter from the Collector, his identity could not be doubted. *Taluka* office could not have refused him. They did.

Incidentally, their action not only countered the command structure, it countered basic common sense as well. They had a data entry room; we were offering them more computers and operators at our cost. Ghonto tried arguing with them but it was no use. They had an independent data entry process; they did not want to let the district headquarters interfere.

Having lived in India for about twenty-six years now (and zero years elsewhere) I know what *Information is Power* means. We have a basic tendency to just keep the information. Letting Ghonto run a data entry center, would have provided the district headquarters full access to the Bhachau data. Why should that not happen was not obvious to us then, it never became fully clear to us ever.

Ghonto could have called up the DDO or Collector for help, but clearly there were things that were much higher than we could even see. There always are. If you be caught in such a situation, it is advisable not to interfere in things or relations you cannot even see. Ghonto was sharp enough to know that.

After trying for about 6 hours, with several different officers, he realized that it was a matter of sharing information. His solution was simple; he offered to leave the boys and the computers in charge of Bhachau authorities. Bhuj would exercise no control, their data would be safe with them, and the process would be accelerated.

The issue was seemingly resolved, but on the next day one of the boys called up Ghonto to complain about the inadequate living arrangements. Ghonto asked the boys to pack up their belongings and sent a car to pick them up in the evening.

I have known Ghonto for some time now. He is a calm person

and never loses his temper. That makes me assume that it was not an instantaneous decision, but I can never be too sure. Frankly, if I had ever bothered to ask, he would have told me. Anyway, it was a sensible decision. We did need resources for running a center at Bhuj itself.

After that our interaction with Bhachau administration was minimal. We had volunteered our services to the administration, if the Bhachau administration did not want to make use of it, there were other places to work too. But the pressure of those 6 hours had long lasting effects on Ghonto. One morning I woke up a little early to find Ghonto shouting Bhachau! Bhachau! In his sleep! Now that is what I call a nightmarish experience.

It was not surprising that when only a month later, Bhachau administration requested one of us to help them out, I felt proud. As fate would have it, Ghonto had left us by then, as his mother was not keeping well. I am sure he would have enjoyed that phone call more than I did.

Anyway, after the boys reached back, we set up a second data entry center in Bhuj. Soon, Ghonto got a night shift started. Running things in Bhuj was comparatively much easier. We were all based in Bhuj, the boys were at home, and productivity was more.

Like all good managers Ghonto believed in keeping his *bachche* comfortable. I say *bachche* because Ghonto himself always referred them as *bachche* (children). In response, all of them referred to Ghonto as *sir*. It was a relationship of a student and teacher, Ghonto taught them not only how to work on the data entry package, but also how to play computer games in their spare time.

I think Ghonto had a love for teaching. On a number of times I have found him explaining various kinds of things to various kinds of people: from teaching how a lighter works to how to use a mobile phone. But the best was when he taught the use of the Internet to Mr. Y.

Mr. Y was a middle level government official posted in Bhuj. An efficient and hard working guy, he used to sit with us in the office late into the night. Ghonto not only showed him how to navigate the Internet explorer and operate an email account, but also took

him to various websites; websites that are mostly banned in educational institutions.

Its not surprising that in just two weeks Ghonto had formed friendly relations with many people. Interestingly, even my friendship with Ghonto developed in Bhuj, though the two of us had been batch mates for two years in IIM Ahmedabad.

In the tent in an engineering college where we had put up, in the DDO office where we used to sit in those days, in the streets of Bhuj, it was nice to have Ghonto around. A cheerful and positive person, Ghonto would often begin a conversation in Rajesh Khanna style: *Aey Pushpa!* We made fun of him regarding his Bhachau nightmare. We ate lots of biscuits and *toffee* bars together. I wonder if those were just sixteen days....

Mausi

When they write a history of the devastating Bhuj earthquake and the amazing comeback by the people of Kutch, they will not write about *Mausi*. In fact they may not even know *Mausi*. And, so it is left to me to tell you the story of *Mausi*.

After the earthquake most of the houses were gone and people were living in tents. With most of the restaurants closed, getting food was a problem for everybody. Most people were forced to eat in the community kitchens. In such circumstances, *Mausi's* home run restaurant was a boon to all those who found her.

We did.

Her business model was simple. She cooked in her own kitchen and her family helped her in it. She kept the price of her food low. The food was excellent, the service fast. It was an amazing bargain: good food at low prices, no strings attached.

Obviously, we loved the place. So did many others and hence what *Mausi* missed in profit margins, she made up in volumes.

To me she represented the well-known Gujarati business acumen and the lesser-known ability of people of Kutch to fight back¹⁰. Earthquake was a thing of the past. You had to get ahead with life.

An excellent food at very low prices was only one of the benefits that we got. *Mausi's* drawing room was a good resting-place and the waiting time an excellent getaway from the hurly-burly of office work. Sitting under the fan, we could relax and discuss all sorts of official and non-official things. On top of it all we could enjoy the television. *Mausi's* became an institution for us.

But there was a catch. *Mausi* was a strict disciplinarian. She scolded us whenever we missed meals without proper notice. She wasn't deterred by the fact that we had a fixed contract and were

¹⁰ The same spirit was also exhibited by Shuklaji, who was recruited by the administration temporarily to help in our office work. Before the earthquake he owned a franchise center for computer education, but still agreed to work with us, for only a few thousands per month.

paying even for those meals that we didn't have. Missing meals was just not allowed. Additionally, she scolded us whenever we were late for meals.

But her anger always had that motherly love and concern in it. We could never feel bad about it. Not even when she took away the TV remote from Prashant because he was surfing channels! "*Jyada badalne se kharaab ho jaata hai.*"

However, she knew that we were working with the collector and were volunteers. She couldn't scold us for being busy, when she knew that we were working for others. And so, we got away with breaking the rules more than once.

One big attraction at Mausi's was meeting new people everyday. Slowly, we started recognizing faces. Most of her customers were regulars.

Murali was one of them. I first met him at *Mausi's* place. Not coincidentally, the last time I met him was also at *Mausi's* place. In between I met him often at *Mausi's* place!

Murali, being the branch manager of an insurance company in Bhuj, was a troubled soul. The earthquake had destroyed immeasurable amount of property. Murali's organization expected him to take decisions on all claims, take right decisions, take them fast, and without any extra help from the head-office.

He was going through one of the hardest days of his life. And since, we were not from the same world, we could freely pour out our feelings to each other. It was like chatting over Internet with a stranger, only that in this case you had the stranger with you in flesh and blood.

Murali once told me that had it not been for these meetings with us, he would have gone mad. I knew he was not joking. I myself had similar thoughts.

Saving Murali, and through him his customers, was Mausi's contribution to the rehabilitation efforts.

I am sure there would have been many other Muralis and Rishis who had food, rested and recharged there. And, then they went ahead to serve the people. But, most of them were foot soldiers and their contribution would never be known. Obviously, *Mausi* would not be a star. But to all of us, who ate at her place, she remains the *Maa-si*, like mother.

Nidhi Tewari

When Prashant told me that a student from IRMA¹¹ wanted to join us in Bhuj, there was no cause for me to object. But when he told me that she was the batch topper, I immediately protested. Not that I have anything against batch toppers, but she was the batch topper. She.

I am not a male chauvinist, I firmly believe in that. And whatever ideas I have on greater suitability of one or the other sexes in particular situations, I keep them to myself. Or maybe discuss them with just close friends. This is the first time that I am doing an act that will tend to brand me a chauvinist.

I accept that I did advise Prashant against taking Nidhi onboard our team because she was a girl. "Boss! Try to understand; you don't have a roof over your head. *Khud to tent main rah rahe hain, use kahan rakhenge* ? I am not saying that she will not contribute, but the time and resources you will spend on her, are unjustified."

As usual, Prashant was more positive than I. "See, she is pretty sure that she wants to work here. And she says she understands the difficulties here. I am sure we can work out things."

It's good that she wants to work here. Let her go and work with any organization. I am not objecting to that. There are so many women who are contributing through UNDP, *Abhiyan* and other NGOs. I don't question that. But we are a team of five guys, do you think that a stranger girl will fit our group?"

But I could not convince Prashant. Probably her determination was reflecting through him. He made the decision to invite Nidhi Tewari to join our team.

He was right.

Nidhi joined our group at a time when Prashant was leading an initiative on setting up an Information Gallery¹². Prashant requested her to handle the gallery to which she agreed. Hence,

¹¹Institute of Rural Management in Anand, Gujarat

began the process of her long association with Bhuj. Though none of us, except perhaps Nidhi herself, had any idea that her innings in rehabilitation work were going to be as long as anybody else's. I doubt if even she knew it.

Far from being a trouble-maker, Nidhi, to my pleasant amazement, turned out to be a trouble-shooter. And she would do it at all levels: right from helping individual citizens with pieces of information to advising Sahu, the CEO of GSDMA on whether G4-G5 categories should be merged.

Her role as the incharge of Information Gallery brought her across the widest possible spectrum of problems and issues. Common people, NGOs, visitors and volunteers would come to her with various kinds of queries. She would provide them the requisite contact information, government circulars, information on government resources and various other official data. The official role would end at that but often Nidhi Tewari, the person took over.

Since the people came to her with varied types of issues, she had to work with various organizations and government departments. But that never deterred her. She was out to solve problems.

It can be said about Nidhi, that before you see her, you see her smile. And that smile has a power to make you smile too. Before she would even talk to you she would make you smile. In fact she would insist that you smile. If you wanted her help, you had to be positive about life. That was her unique way of solving problems. Unfailingly, she was successful.

However, universal trouble-shooters can be also be troublesome at times and on the very third day of her presence in Bhuj we almost had a fight.

She was trying to dictate matters in the working of a data entry centre. That was Amrut's responsibility, but since he had taken it up only recently he did not object.

I did.

And she never excused me for that.

After all I had come in the way of solving a problem. Who

¹²For details on Information Gallery, read *Bhonga*

cared whether it was her problem or not.

The whole day she would sit in the Information Gallery, meeting people and dissipating information. A large part of her time would also go in collating the information, talking to experts, attending meetings to understand the dynamic policy environment. Arranging things and sprucing up the gallery happened after the regular office hours. Inevitably she worked late into the night.

If you link this with the fact that official car was not available after 9 PM, you can immediately infer that I had to drop her home on my bike. The room she was staying in was about four kilometers away from office, which in a city like Bhuj is a long distance.

She insisted on taking an auto-rickshaw, but I overruled that; it was not advisable for a lone girl to travel by auto at midnight. Whether I was trying to create justification for my initial opposition to her presence or whether doing penance for it, is still not clear to me!

Bhuj, by any standards, is a safe city. The crime rate in Bhuj must be lower than most Indian cities. But I used to be concerned about our safety while travelling at midnight.

It was true that volunteers in UNDP and *Abhiyan* offices also worked late nights, but then they mostly moved around in bigger groups, and that too in official cars. Even the fact that we were working with the District Collector somehow never appeared to be sufficient.

But that was only till the day we went out to a dinner with the Collector.

It was Mukim's idea. He wanted to go out and eat rotlas¹³ So plans were made for dinner in a resort just outside Bhuj. It was a small group: Mukim's family, the DSP with his family, Ninama, Valvi, Prashant, Nidhi and I.

I was introduced to the DSP, Vivek Srivastava there, and had a nice long discussion with him on a host of topics. Besides a similarity in educational background, the fact that we were both born and brought up in Uttar Pradesh helped.

After that dinner, the bike drives became totally tension free for me. However late it was, I never thought twice about anything.

¹³A Rotla is a chapatti made out of coarse grain.

It is important to note that all these tensions were purely the creation of my mind. Nidhi, I am sure, never even thought of it. She was too focused on her work to care about such things.

And there were lots of other things about which she never cared. Following protocols was one. Obviously, there were times when we landed into awkward moments because of that.

Sometimes we met the DDO at his residence after the dinner. We would sit in a tent that Prashant and I lovingly called a Topno's *darbar*.

That name, however, is a misnomer. It was a simple tent, a bare canvas sheet arranged on a number of poles. There was a cot on one side, where Topno used to sit, and two rows of chairs lined up in front of the cot, where the guests sat.

It was a simple sitting arrangement; the place for the host was clearly demarcated. You could not have made a mistake, but Nidhi did. Once, as all of us entered in together, she sat in Topno's place. It took all of Prashant's and my wits to indicate to her, to leave seat for the DDO.

But she really outdid herself when a government officer, driving his jeep, offered her a lift. Nidhi nonchalantly opened the back door and tried climbing in. Thankfully, the officer concerned was a gentleman; he politely told her to sit on the front seat.

With such innocence, she has been happily working with the government, its officers and institutions for the past three years. She is still at Bhuj, heading the local GSDMA office, working towards tying up the last pieces of rehabilitation work.

Sometimes, I wonder, what would have happened if Prashant had accepted my advice.

The Survivors

The earthquake had damaged almost every building in the Kutch district. I wonder if there was even a single structure that survived without a crack. But houses are generally sturdy structures, and even when most of them were not built for withstanding the quake, many of them took it with dignity, and stood through the tremors. I called them *The Survivors*.

Broadly, these structures could be divided into two categories (That is true for almost everything, that has more than one members): the ones with lesser damages and the ones with greater damages.

People whose houses fell in the first category continued living in their houses. Typically, throughout the day, they would live in the building, performing their daily chores in the house. But for sleeping, almost everybody preferred the tents. You felt that while in your senses you could take on another earthquake, but if it were to attack treacherously at the night, you would be helpless. Hence, the choice of tents for sleeping.

For the other category of houses, the administration decided that a damaged building could be a dangerous thing to be left alone. Even a slight tremor could cause havoc, if there were people living in or around such buildings. They had to be brought down. Euthanasia!

The army, which was actively helping the administration in relief and rehabilitation, was entrusted with the task of bringing down such buildings. Blowing up buildings using dynamite is an art. The key is to ensure that the building collapses upon itself, and the nearby structures are left untouched. That is why the soldiers who handled the job took pride in it.

Ninama used to recount later, "Every evening an officer would smartly walk into my cabin, salute and report the day's work."

"Ward 11 main, chaar buildingein. giraa dee hain, Shriman! Verma building main dynamite laga diyaa hai Shriman!" (We have blown up four buildings and have fixed dynamite on a fifth one, Sir!)

It was almost as if he was reporting *dushman ke chaar tank uda diye hain Shriman!*

This passion that they had in their work, ensured that the demolition was done perfectly. There were no reported incidents of damages to life or property during a demolition.

But the soldiers didn't handle everything. Civilian engineers also handled the bulldozers. And that is why one fine evening when I returned to the Collector's office, I found the entrance blocked by debris. I managed to skirt it and reach the office.

The office was in worse shape: Mukim had lost his temper.

Now that may not appear to be significant to you, but that was the only time in those two months, when he was really angry. Also to remind you, dear reader, Mukim was the District Collector, and when the district collector loses his temper, it's not a good sign.

His anger was justified. There used to be a water tank mounted on about 20 feet high pillars just outside the collectorate gate. During the earthquake, the pillars had been damaged but the tank had stood. After water was drained out of it, it was considered a safe structure, and hence left alone for some time. Now, with more time on their hands, the engineers decided to bring it down. That would have been perfectly alright, except that they brought it down on themselves!

In a bid to ease the removal of debris, it was decided to pull down the structure towards the roadside. Incidentally, that was the very place where the bulldozer stood. Surprisingly, nobody noticed this; at least not till the long arm of the bulldozer went around the water tank and pulled it towards the bulldozer. Obviously, some debris fell on the bulldozer, and the operator lost his nerves and pressed the lever even harder. Thus, bringing the entire structure on his head!

The operator had to be admitted to the hospital, the bulldozer was damaged and the entrance to the collectorate was blocked. On top of it, while falling the tank pulled an electric wire passing by, causing a short circuit, which resulted in power failure in the collectorate. Not surprising then that even Mukim lost his temper. Fortunately, this was the only incident of its kind, and we did not give many such opportunities to people to laugh at the government.

However, there were times, when people were unhappy with the government. This does not appear to be a very revealing statement; it is not. But there are times, when there are conflicts between citizens, and the administration has to arbitrate. Such decisions leave at least one party disillusioned, so there has to be somebody or the other who is unhappy with the government.

When the government identified the damaged houses for demolition there was a big hue and cry. The owners did not want their buildings to be demolished. The buildings had stood the great earthquake, why should now the government worry about minor after-shocks, is what the owners argued.

On the other extreme, I once met an old gentleman who wanted the government to demolish a tall building near the road to his home. According to him, the building had suffered large damages, and could crumble on the road any time. This was too risky for the passers-byes. The government official concerned, however, was clear that since the government had already done a detailed survey and pulled down all the buildings that were considered dangerous, there was nothing more to be done. His solution was simple too: Just file a court case against the government!!!

After the water tank incident, I was not sure if the civil engineers and their survey could be trusted, but the administrators have little options but to accept the advice of their technical staff. And that is what the official concerned was doing. The survey was complete. The buildings that had been left standing, were real survivors, and government had no business going after them.

With time, most of the people repaired their houses. I did not hear of many buildings falling in the after-shocks. Perhaps, those buildings had something in them. They just had to stand, even with bruises. May be to keep reminding the future about what all past has seen.

Olmado and the Kurta Clad Gentleman

When Olmado came to Bhuj for the second time he had Mrs. Mirchandani, with him. I was relieved because I thought that having an interpreter should solve matters instantly. But that did not happen. We had still a long way to go before a solution emerged. Olmado was very clear that he wanted to invest in water. We were very clear that there was nothing he could do in water. Both of us went on discussing.

Mrs. Mirchandani was a good translator. She was good at her English; I assume she must have been good at her Spanish too. But there was a gap somewhere, because none of us was able to convince the other.

After some efforts I managed to convince Olmado that investing in drilling wells wasn't a very good idea, because all our machines were anyway busy drilling wells. The next scheme however, was even more surprising. He had already talked to a bottled water distributor, and wanted to donate a thousand 25 litres cans. In my opinion such a thing would have been highly effective if done immediately after the quake. But by now two months had elapsed, things had stabilised, Fire fighting was out; we were looking at medium to long-term solutions, and providing one time supply of good water was not one of them.

We were sitting in my office on the first floor. Olmado had a big map of Kutch that he had spread on the table and the three of us were sitting surrounding it. Mrs. Mirchandani would start the conversation by saying "he wants to know which are the villages without drinking water", and I would instantly end it by telling her that there were no villages without water.

Now, I was representing the administration and no administration can ever accept the fact that people are without drinking water. In fact, I am sure that there are no people without drinking water. It is biologically not possible. But the map showed that the area was semi-arid; Olmado was sure that there had to be

people who did not have access to drinking water.

I tried explaining the current scenario to them. It was true that there were villages where drinking water was not readily available. In places where there was no pipeline, people had to walk long distances to get drinking water. But they did get water. Additionally, the administration was supplying water to the difficult areas through water tankers. Donating them bottled water would tackle their need for a very short period but the basic problem would remain. We needed long term solutions like building water tanks and pipelines.

Probably it was somewhere in the third cycle when Ninama came in. He was attending a meeting in the conference room next to my office, and had decided to take a break. Perhaps he needed some conditioned air; there was no AC in the conference room. There was a middle aged, kurta-clad gentleman, with graying hair with him.

Both of them were mute spectators for about three seconds, and then this gentleman decided to join in. "*Are inse kya poochh rahe ho, humse poochho hum batayenge!*", is what he told Olmado. I was aghast. I had never experienced such courtesy before. The only thing that saved my reputation was that Olmado did not know either Hindi or English.

Before I could tell this to the gentleman, he had already proceeded to display that he was the authority on everything and hence, everybody should be talking to him. He took out a photograph of a child staring into an empty ditch, presumably looking for water. It was a typical photo for a newspaper, the kind of picture that would sensationalize the issue but help nobody. He wouldn't even tell which village was he referring to.

This man must be a local leader I assumed, who else would have the audacity to talk to a government representative like that. Totally bewildered, I looked towards Ninama. He told me in a very low tone that the gentleman was a reporter. Simultaneously, he explained to the reporter that I was a volunteer working with the government. In the slight pause that followed, I managed to disclose the fact that Olmado could not understand Hindi or English, and hence to interact, you had to talk to Mrs. Mirchandani.

Now, reporters are like trained hunting dogs, they can see a story from a distance. In this case there was none. Foreigners were nothing new in the region, and so were offers of help. For a change, this time the government was actively helping the foreigner with the help offer. There was no story because this reporter, as I came to know later, was strictly anti-establishment. According to him, his duty was to write against all that the government was doing. When he learnt that Olmado was happy with the government he left in a hurry.

But the memories of a child staring into an empty ditch remained with Olmado. He was even more convinced that there were places and people without water, and he had to help them out. I tried all kinds of arguments that came to mind.

The kind of shortage that was depicted in the photograph can never be eliminated. Tankers can supply water only once a day. The child could be looking for anything else as well. These reporters are not to be trusted, he didn't even remember the name of the village.

The last statement was what won the argument. As soon as he learnt that the kurta clad gentleman who had shown the photograph was a reporter, he decided that the photograph could be easily forgotten.

After that I made my approach more positive by asserting that there was a dire need for hospitals. There had been very few hospitals in the region and after the earthquake even those had been heavily damaged. The people needed medical care. There was no argument. I was pleading to him to invest in a hospital.

That made sense to Olmado, and he agreed to invest in health sector, teaching me a very important lesson that day. Never tell somebody that his ideas are not good; just give better ideas.

Jaydeep and Riyaz

"Sir. main Mandvi se Jaydeep bol raha hoon." That was a phone call that I received daily throughout the period of nine days when I managed the data entry in the district.

The Mandavi data entry centre had been setup by Amrut, one of our team members from IIMA. Due to personal reasons, Amrut had to leave before the centre could fully stabilise. Prashant asked me to handle the work, in addition to the GI Sheets distribution that I was already managing.

In those days, we were running four data entry centers across the district. Daily status reporting was one of the key activities in the morning. All the centers were expected to call me up and discuss the state of affairs and then send me a fax on the number of entries made every day. *Mandvi* centre did.

That spoke a lot about Jaydeep, the centre in-charge. That probably explained why Amrut had put him in charge.

Jaydeep had begun working with us as a data entry operator. The work was what all data entry operators do: data entry. You read the information from a survey form and type it on a computer keyboard. The work requires dedication as the chance of making mistakes is high and there was no way the data can be cross-checked.

Running three shifts on 40 computers required over 100 operators. Corporates these days believe in outsourcing all such jobs but we were in a hurry. There had to be a quick way for selecting capable and dedicated people.

It was one of those rare instances when Prashant manages to come up with a simple solution to a complex problem.

The colleges in Bhuj had not yet started functioning. The students had lots of free time on their hands. Surely, they wouldn't mind working for the district administration.

Students were recruited by dozens; first by Ghonto and then by Amrut. They were all sensible and educated boys and girls who

understood the importance of correct data, the seriousness of their work, and hence, their responsibility.

Though nominal wages were paid, nobody was working for money. In fact quite a few of the boys were from well-to-do families and were always better groomed than Amrut, Prashant or me. Once a week their payments were made, and at least I tried to put on my best shirt that day.

Jaydeep was working in the Bhuj data entry centre when the *Mandvi* centre was being set up. Setting up centres outside Bhuj was always challenging¹⁴. Managing the office and the staying arrangements from Bhuj was expected to be problematic. Amrut knew this. But knowing the problem was not sufficient; he found the solution too: Jaydeep was taken off his data entry work and sent to *Mandvi*. He was hard working; he was dedicated; he was smart.

Setting up a facility in those days was not easy. We could supply computers and data operators from Bhuj, but even getting a room with electrical power points was a problem.¹⁵ Accommodation was another.

In *Mandvi* it turned out that though we could get place for both the office and the stay, the two places were miles apart. A large part of the time was lost in commuting to-and-fro for lunch. Jaydeep, with his focus on increasing the pace of the work, could not bear this.

One day I got a call from him, where he proved to me that if the boys were asked to eat at a restaurant near the office, the improvement in productivity would more than offset the costs. I was pleasantly amazed: the boy had picked up Profit and Loss responsibility and was making the kind of calculations I was taught at the Management School.

Having solved this problem he went ahead to create a contest like situation in his team where the boys competed with each other for doing more entries. There were no awards; it was a game, winning was a reward by itself.

The status reports were excellent, as the status itself improved reasonably fast. The only crisis happened the day when they lost

¹⁴ See Ghonto

¹⁵ In fact the *Abadasa* Centre had to be wound up, due to excessive electrical fluctuations in the town

7000 entries because of computer hard disk crash. Jaydeep was almost on the verge of tears. I tried consoling him, as it was obvious that it was not his mistake, but he was clearly disturbed.

The entries had to be fed again, and though some time was lost in the process it was made up for reasonably fast. Jaydeep, however, never forgot that and told me days later, "If it had not been for that data loss, I would have completed the work in 10 days instead of 12."

Meanwhile, back at Bhuj, another of the data entry boys was shining in his willingness and ability to contribute. Riyaz Somani was already working as the in-charge for one of the two centres in Bhuj, while still working on data entry himself. Additionally, whenever an operator was absent, Riyaz would do an additional shift as well.

Along the course of the work, Riyaz got so involved that when his family moved to Pune, Riyaz refused to leave till the work was over.

By the time I took over the data entry work, considerable data entry had happened. Administration was already expecting reports.¹⁶ I started focusing on summarization of the data.

In this I received immense support and participation from Topno, the DDO. Together we spent long hours in discussing the easiest way of summarization.

Data collation was the first challenge as the data was keyed into separate computers, and there was no network. We had to use physical devices for data transfer.

The files were huge and for different reasons we failed with Floppies, CDs and Zip Drives. Finally, I had to learn hard disk-to-hard disk data transfer!

Once collated the data files became bigger and systems became slower. When I realised that I needed help in preparing various reports, I pulled Riyaz away from his data entry work.

The type of work I expected him to do was entirely new for Riyaz. Analysing data and preparing reports for Mansingh, the Chief Relief Coordinator, was something he could not have dreamt of earlier; but I had full confidence in him. Besides I had no options! Work hours were already long, and everything was urgent. I needed help.

¹⁶ Officially, at the state level. Gujarat Informatics was responsible for managing data and we used to pass on our data banks to them. But for the *Talukas* where data entry was handled by us, administration did expect us to give relevant reports too.

In Riyaz I got an able lieutenant. Here was somebody, I could explain the work to and expect it to get done. Correctly too. When I left office, which was generally around 1 AM at the night, Riyaz was in office. When I came back at 9 AM he was already there. Actually, he had started sleeping in the office.

Soon, the data began making sense. Though the records were still to be verified, the summaries were reliable. We could estimate the category wise¹⁷ damage in each village. We could tell what was the total expected compensation in *Mandvi Taluka*. We could even tell how many *pakka* houses in *Abadasa* taluka had suffered G5 level damage, and were expected to get compensation below Rs. 4000.

Since we could, we did. The data was indicative, but should have been useful in policy setting. At least, Mansingh used to call me up once a while to ask for figures.

We had established a perfect chain of command. Jaydeep never asked us what we did with the data, so long as he knew that Riyaz and I were collating it. Riyaz did not know what I did with the reports he generated. I have no idea how exactly did Mansingh use them. But each of us trusted those above and below us. We were all cogs in the wheel, doing our jobs with dedication, devotion and expecting others to do theirs.

And when Mansingh later told me that we had done a good job, I immediately called up Riyaz and Jaydeep to tell them that they had done a good job. They really had.

¹⁷The government had classified the houses into five categories from G1 to G5 based on the degree of damage

The Official Offices

"Obviously, once you have reached the top...", *Ghonto*, was vociferously responding to something I had said, "...you have no option but to come down and when..."

Craaaaaashhhh! Down came the table, and Ghonto came after. And, a hundred government files followed.

It was one of those unstable tables whose legs are located somewhere towards the centre. You are advised not to sit or rest on the edges of such tables. Not that Ghonto didn't know this. He knew that leaning on the table was risky, but he got involved in the argument and he forgot. And gravity is something you cannot afford to forget.

We were sitting in the room that was functioning as *Topno's* office in those days. Though *Topno* himself was not in office, the staff was. When the table fell with a loud crash, the usher and an orderly rushed in.

What a sight it was! There was Ghonto on the floor, trying to rise. The table was beside him and there were files, papers, paperweights, and the telephone lying on the floor.

The only reason why they didn't laugh, perhaps, was that they had seen worse. They were people who had dug files, papers, office equipment and furniture from the debris of the original DDO office building.

The three-storeyed building had suffered heavy damages during the earthquake. In fact half of the building had to be razed down to the ground. The other half of the building stood but was considered too risky. The entire building had to be abandoned till repair work could be completed.

Two months after the earthquake, when we reached Bhuj, the entire District Development Office was being managed out of tents. *Topno*, the DDO, himself was sitting in the room that used to be a driver's cabin. That was a single storeyed building and was the only undamaged structure in the complex.

Since, we were assisting *Topno* directly and operated his office computer, we also sat in a corner in the same room. For many months *Topno* managed his operations from the same set up-the DDO operating from a small two room office, and the staff in the tents. It was not until three months after the earthquake that the old building was repaired and the Special DDO Dhananjay Dwivedi led the office rehabilitation by setting up his office in that.

Once we started getting involved in a number of things, our activity in the Collectorate increased. Interactions with Ninama became more frequent and I started sitting at Ninama's office computer for long durations.

Ninama's cabin was much different because at any given point of time there used to be eight to ten people surrounding him. They could be government staff, local leaders, social activists, common men, journalists, etc. And sometimes we added ourselves to that list.

As the Resident Deputy Collector, Ninama was responsible for the execution of the policy level decisions taken by the collector.

Also, by nature he was a man of action and such traits cannot remain hidden. Everybody knew that the fastest way to get anything executed was to route it through Ninama.

I wonder where he got the energy levels to pick up one issue after another and to find a solution to all of them. He never sent you to someone else, unless it was absolutely necessary. Positive or negative, you could expect a decision from him. Mostly, he would not only decide the issue then and there; he would help you in getting the necessary paperwork moved too.

Obviously, he was always surrounded by people, and his office was noisy. In fact it was the noisiest of all the government offices I saw.

However, when Mansingh was in town the office suddenly morphed into a silent and serene place. He would take over Ninama's cabin, and you could find Ninama managing his affairs with nothing but his loyal cellphone.

Also, at nights, the office used to be quite. After Ninama and his staff had left, our colleagues, some staff members and a few NGO activists used to discuss the day and finish our work.

It was during one of those long nights that somebody dared to smoke a cigarette in the cabin. For two hours after that Prashant and I sat in the room, with all the doors and windows open and all the fans and ACs working.

A total contrast to the hurly-burly of the RDC office was the collector's chamber, located just across the road. The two offices faced each other, yet they were worlds apart.

One was calm and soothing; the other was active and buzzing. One was sparsely populated; the other was crowded. One was policy making; one was execution.

There was only one instance when I observed some agitation in the collector's cabin.

I was sitting on the central seat across Mukim when he asked his secretary to send in the next set of visitors. A crowd of three people entered.

You might want to believe that three is a crowd only in proverbs, but in this case it really was. And all of them were talking to the collector even before entering the office.

In those days I could not follow Gujarati (and I can't understand it even now), so it took me some time to realize that though the group had come together, they were two warring parties. The one sitting on my right was the Principal of Lalan College¹⁸ and the other two, sitting on my left were volunteers from a college in Baroda.

The volunteers had been teaching at the college for the past few weeks as the regular teachers were not available. Now the Principal had abruptly asked them to leave. The reason according to him was that the service they were doing was not in the right spirit and they wanted to earn a name for their organization. The volunteers alleged that the Principal disliked them for no particular reason; and if a newspaper had carried a story on the good work being done by them that was just indicative of the efficiencies of others.

A collector, by virtue of his position, makes decisions. And his decisions are respected and obeyed. Even Mukim could have given some instructions and closed the issue. But he chose to win them over.

¹⁸ The Government Degree College in Bhuj is named *Lalan College*

He heard them out. Then he went over to introducing me and my role in rehabilitation. He explained my background and the corporate life that I was supposed to be entering soon. I didn't understand the reasons immediately but he exaggerated the work I was doing in Bhuj.

All of us were a little puzzled till he launched his final speech. "This guy here has left a lucrative job¹⁹ to work for rehabilitation. He is handling three different kinds of work. He works from 9 AM to 12 mid-night. But does he give interviews to the press? Has he put any banners around declaring his work? And, do I dislike him because he can help me in my work?" .

In a few minutes of monologue, it was clear that he had won them over. He never pronounced a decision, but both the parties knew. And they readily agreed.

There's a difference between convincing people and really doing it. You wouldn't understand it till you have entered Mukim's office.

Then Mukim got transferred, and a new collector took over. As I also left Bhuj a couple of days after that, I did not get too many opportunities to work with the new collector. However, I did observe that the office remained as serene and calm as ever. Probably, it had nothing to do with an individual's personality; a collector's office has to be that way.

It was in these three offices that we spent a large part of our time during our first ten days in Bhuj. Then one day Ninama called me and told me that he had been considering allocating some sitting space to us. We were assisting the government in a number of areas and in his opinion having a fixed seat would help us in improving our efficiency. We were already carrying lots of papers and files with us. We needed a landline phone connection to interact with the *Talukas*. We needed a computer for everything from drafting letters for Mukim to preparing data summaries for Mansingh. I suspect there was also a need to reduce our movement into the three offices!

¹⁹This was an innocent lie. I never left my job; I had just taken a one-month postponement.

Ninama offered us a fully equipped office complete with a phone, furniture, computer, curtains and even an Air Conditioner. The only catch was that it was on the first floor.

In an earthquake-affected area, most people avoid higher floors. That is why the office was still vacant. We accepted with gratitude²⁰; there was no way we could have found a better deal. There were no others rooms vacant in the collectorate campus. Things changed vastly after we started sitting in that cabin. Your roof over your head certainly provides comfort. Besides, having a base stabilized our routine. We didn't have to carry every important paper, and Mahinder Singh knew where to look for me, whenever he came to the collectorate.

The curtains on the walls, however, remained a mystery for many. Even Prashant did not realize the importance till one day I decided to tell him. I called him to my seat, lifted the curtain covering the wall just behind my back, and showed him the two foreigners standing in the parking lot. It took him some time to realize that there was no window in the wall; he was looking out from a huge crack in the wall.

²⁰To quote *Joshiji* "It was a bold (in our case: desperate) thing to do."

Wrong Number

Tring tring. I picked up the phone. *Can I talk to Mukim Sahib?* Despite having heard that question uncountable number of times, I decided to be polite once more. *I am sorry; this is no longer Mukim Sahib's number.*

So whose number is this?

This was also the umpteenth time, and I could no longer control my anger. *This is MY number.* And I slammed the phone down.

Cell phones were amongst the facilities provided to us by the district administration. In a life full of hectic activity and confusion all around, cell phones were of immense help. Many landline phones were out of order. People were rarely found in their offices. Everything you did was ultra urgent.

In such a scenario, cell phones solved a lot of problems. In fact, I wouldn't be much wrong if I say that such speedy rehabilitation of Bhuj would never have been possible without cell phones.

However, for me there was a slight problem. The number allotted to me by the administration had earlier belonged to the Collector - Kutch, Anil Mukim. He had decided to change his number because he was getting too many calls even two months after the quake. Obviously, I ended up receiving those "too many" calls.

I avoided disclosing Mukim's new number, as much as possible, as that would have defeated the entire purpose of changing the number. But, that inevitably led to a question on my identity. This irritated me, because explaining my identity was difficult.

"So whose number is this?" was becoming unbearable so I intelligently modified my reply to *"I am sorry, Mukim Sahib's number has changed. May I know who is calling?"*

To some, I gave Mukim's new number, others I directed to the resident deputy collector, Ninama. That saved me the trouble of explaining my identity and left everybody happy. Except, perhaps, Ninama.

However, "*So whose number is this?*" remained a mystery till much later when I learnt that the Gujarat Government had booked the entire series of numbers from 98252-49000 to 98252-49999. Since, I was carrying a number from that series (49 series, as it was popularly referred to), I was expected to be a government official and hence, the question on my identity was inevitable. And all these days I had been blaming people for being too intrusive.

There were other incidents as well. People called me up and started talking to Mukim. I called up people and started talking like Mukim. They replied as if I was the collector. Whether making a call or receiving it, the end result was always the same: confusion.

The very day I got the phone, *I called up a Mamlatdar*. "*Good evening sir! Mamlatdar ABC here sir.*" I could almost see him standing up to take my call. Who says *Caller Line Identification* is a useful facility.

On another occasion I called up a *Taluka* headquarter and explained some work to the *Taluka* Development Officer. He readily agreed with all that I said, but when I told him to fax the data to me at the District Development Officer's office, he lost his temper. "*Aap kaun sahab bol rahen hain ?*" When I tried to explain, he cut me short "*Did no one ever teach you to introduce yourself before starting a discussion ?*"

I was shocked by his polite manners, but soon realized that all this while he had been under an impression that he was talking to the Collector! When I asked him to fax the data to the DDO office, he realized that I was not the collector and lost his temper. This number had once more put me in a tight spot.

Having a Gujarat government number had its advantages as well. This realization dawned on me when I was sent to Bhachau to clear up the mess in the computerized data. Bhachau was the worst affected town and its Municipal officer was heavily overworked. His staff too was under too much stress. The officers had been working day and night for over two months. They had little time or regard for a young boy, whose role, capabilities and identity were quite unclear.

Anyway, I was there on work and immediately went to the tin shed acting as the computer room. After completing the work in a few hours, I decided to meet the Municipal officer once more and formally close the matter. He was happy knowing that at least one of his problems had been solved, and asked for my contact for future help. What followed next was almost unbelievable.

As soon as he heard my number, he almost jumped out of his seat. *But this is a government number! 49 series!* He was of Deputy Collector rank and did not have a *49 series* number. And, he had been treating me like dirt.

After that, he not only apologized for not listening to me but also offered me tea. He even wanted to send an escort with me. The phone number had its advantages as well. I politely refused his offer and left his office hurriedly.

The phone in my pocket was ringing!

After the Quake²¹

On January 26, 2001 the Republic day, at 8:46 AM, an extremely severe earthquake struck Gujarat. The earthquake, which measured 6.9 on Richter Scale (India Meteorological Department's estimate) and MW 7.7 (US Geological Survey's estimate), had its epicentre at latitude 23.40N and longitude 70.28E. located to the north of Bhachau, about 250 km west of Ahmedabad and a depth of 25 km. The ground shaking lasted for about two minutes with strong ground motion lasting for about 25 seconds, and effects from the earthquake were felt throughout the Indian sub-continent.²²

Almost the entire state of Gujarat reeled under its catastrophic impact. A large number of towns and villages in Kutch suffered almost complete destruction. One seriously affected districts included Surendranagar, Rajkot, Jamnagar and Patan.

The loss of lives caused by the earthquake was colossal. About 13,800 people died, and approximately 1,67,000 suffered injury. Around 1.2 million houses, 2000 schools and 300 health centers were destroyed. 10,000 small and medium industrial units went out of production and approximately 50000 artisans lost their livelihood. Work at thousands of salt-pans stopped after earthquake. The basic services' infrastructure, which included water supply, electricity and telecommunications, were also completely disrupted. Around 50 lakh people needed to be given immediate relief and the total direct loss in monetary terms was estimated at around Rs 15308 Crores.

In the fact of these staggering loss estimates, there was a pervasive sense of disempowerment and vulnerability among the people. But the nation rallied to share the grief of the people of Gujarat. As a great expression of human solidarity, relief and support

²¹ Collated by Ms Nidhi Prabha Tewari. Manager, Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority Camp office. Bhuj-Kutch.

²² Collated from various publications and policy documents of Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority and Kutch District Administration

poured in from all over the world. Later as the people recovered from the immediate impact of the disaster, the state brought out policies to address the issue of long-term rehabilitation.

Immediate response: Rescue and Relief Efforts

The State Government, Revenue Department Control Room, Police Wireless Control Room were quickly activated and communication was established through satellite phones. Teams of senior officials were sent to Bhuj by noon. Massive rescue operations were launched with the mobilization and deployment of JCBs, Cranes, Bull Dozers, Dumpers and Gas cutters from various sources. Debris and road clearing work was carried out uninterrupted in the affected towns and villages.

Emergency medical camps were set up by local doctors and Army Hospital at Bhuj opened its door to civilians as Civil Hospital in Bhuj was destroyed. By the end of the first week 615 specialist doctors with 2371 medical teams were present all over the state treating 167,000 injured cases of which over 19,000 were of serious nature. These operations had to be performed in makeshift arrangements. 4829 patients were, referred to the hospitals of other districts and were shifted there by road.

Drinking water supply was restored either by tanker or pipeline within in four days. Electricity was restored in nine affected towns within two days. By the end of the week it was restored in 925 villages.

Free community kitchen services were initiated; food packets, biscuits, water pouches, battery cells, milk powder, and matchboxes were distributed with the help of voluntary agencies. About 65 MT wheat, 30 MT rice, 71 MT Sugar and 53,155 liters edible oil was supplied through the civil supplies set up for community kitchens run by various voluntary agencies benefiting 65,000 families. 2,43,000 Family kits consisting of essential items were distributed free of charge to the affected families.

Tents, Tarpaulins and Plastic sheets brought through various sources were given to 3.48 lakh families, Galvanized Iron (GI) Sheets and cash assistance for construction of interim shelter were given to 2.18 lakh families.

The Rehabilitation Vision

To co-ordinate the massive effort, a nodal agency Gujarat State Disaster Management Authority was created on February 8, 2001 under the chairmanship of the Hon. Chief Minister, with its focus on rehabilitation policy formulation, planning and programme management, mobilization of funds, monitoring, and long term disaster mitigation and preparedness.

The Rehabilitation Policy has a multi-sectoral focus covering Housing, Livelihood, Infrastructure, Social and Community Development and Long Term Disaster Preparedness. It aims at promoting sustainable recovery in the disaster-affected areas, and laying the foundation for sustainable disaster management capacity in Gujarat.

The rehabilitation programme is being implemented with the support of the World Bank (Rs 3044 crores), Asian Development bank (Rs 1697 crores), European commission (Rs 172 crores), The Netherlands (Rs 170 crores), the Government of India (Rs 490 crores) and the Government of Gujarat (Rs 2603 crores) with an estimated Rs 600 crores being put in by the various non-governmental agencies.

Permanent Housing

For the permanent housing reconstruction, the focus was on owner-driven multi-hazard reconstruction of houses with facilitation from the Government in terms of financial, material and technical support and minimal relocation of villages. So far, 97 % of the 9.28 lakh houses to be repaired have been repaired, another 87 % of the 2.15 lakh houses which were completely collapsed have been rebuilt. Further, to tap response of NGOs, a Public-Private Partnership Programme was formulated under which NGOs and the Government collaborated for the reconstruction of houses. Over 85 NGOs participated in this programme to reconstruct 42,000 houses.

All the newly constructed houses are tested for quality by a third party quality audit agency, and the compliance rates have been above 90%.

Livelihood Restoration

To facilitate the restoration of livelihoods, support in the form of working capital assistance, tool kits, loan subsidy and grants has been provided to artisans, small self-enterprises, small-scale industries and salt industries. Around 75000 people have been covered under the same. Further cash and interest subsidy assistance has been provided to around 18,000 small cabins and shops, small industrial units and service and trade units.

For bringing in fresh capital to the economy, a tax holiday has been announced and 138 new industries have started setting up their units in Kutch. These have brought in an investment of Rs 3350 crores²³. More than one and a half lakh farmers have been supported for repair of farm structures, input kits and irrigation assets. Further about 10,000 women have been covered under a special women livelihood restoration programme.

Urban Rehabilitation

The reconstruction of four towns of Bhuj, Bhachau, Anjar and Rapar is a comprehensive effort with safety, multi-hazard structures, efficient planning, excellent infrastructure and scope for future expansion. The urban rehabilitation involves relocating around 5000 households and regulating the reconstruction of around 15000 collapsed buildings. Urban reconstruction of this magnitude under such circumstances has no precedence in the country. Currently relocation sites have been developed, infrastructure works including roads, water supply network, sewerage networks, storm water drainage and public buildings are at various stages of construction in the four towns.

Education and Health

Ninety percent of the 8200 Primary school rooms planned for construction have been completed in partnership with various agencies and the rest are under construction. Municipal Schools, Secondary Schools, Technical Education institutes and Higher Education institutes have also been largely restored.

²³Source: District Industries Centre Bhuj

The reconstruction of health infrastructure including the rebuilding of the General Hospital²⁴, with, is nearing completion. Out the total of 2811 completely destroyed health buildings including Community Health Centre, Primary health centre, Sub Centre and Dispensaries almost 78 % have been completed.

Earthquake had left many people disabled and 98 people as paraplegics²⁵. With the support of more than 50 national and international non-governmental agencies regular on site or institutional physiotherapy, orthopedic care, provision of prosthetic aids, and psychosocial support has been provided to these people. For paraplegic patients, life long pension scheme has been introduced.

The Basic Infrastructure

The reconstruction work on 185 km of state highways has been completed; 957.15 Kms of state highways are being strengthened ; 1300 Km of rural roads have been strengthened and 154 bridges have been restored. 245 dams were restored to safe stage to receive water for storage in the monsoon of the year 2001 and another 222 dams (185 in Kutch & 37 in Saurashtra) are being strengthened. Rural water supply has been restored to pre-earthquake level and the subsequent planning has kept in mind the demand projection for the next 30 years with the use of hazard-resistant construction technology.

Long Term Disaster Preparedness

A community based disaster preparedness programme, called Disaster Risk Management (DRM) is currently under implementation, with the support of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It is part of a national programme being implemented by Ministry of Home Affairs with the support of UNDP and attempts to raise the capacity of the community and the Government to manage disasters.

The programme aims at increasing the preparedness of the State of Gujarat for future natural and other disasters, so as to reduce the vulnerability of its population and economy, as well as to minimize life and property loss.

²⁴Being done with state of art base isolation technology, with the support of PMNRF at the cost of Rs. 140 crores

²⁵people with Spinal cord injuries

Bhuj was an epicentre of the terrible earthquake that shook Gujarat on January 26, 2001. Mahendra Singh, and a thousand others like him, were unknown soldiers who made the reconstruction of the city possible. Rishi Sanwal, who was then studying at the Indian Institute of Management at Ahmedabad, was another one of the volunteers who helped in this process. **The Bhuj Story : After the Quake** is his record of the unusual people he met there - and the absolutely unique experience they went through together. The book with a tremendous racy style will definitely make a "must have " book on the "do-gooders" of Bhuj.

Born and brought up in the hills of Uttar Pradesh, Rishi Sanwal is interested in varied subjects ranging from social work to operations research. After completing his management studies from Indian Institute of management (IIM), Ahmedabad, he is currently working as a management consultant.

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